

Michel de Montaigne (1533 - 1592)

French essayist and Philosopher.

From a wealthy family. Studied at College in Bordeaux with some leading humanists and at Toulouse. Member of the Bordeaux parliament for 13 years.

In 1518 a French translation of Raimond Sebond's Natural Theology was published. Sebond was a 15th c. Spanish theologian who had taught at Toulouse. Sebond claimed in his book that human reason could comprehend the nature of the universe and establish the existence and nature of God. In his Essays, Montaigne included the "An Apology for Raimond Sebond". He wrote this essay while he was studying the recently recovered writings of ancient Greek Skeptics. These had a profound effect on Montaigne, especially the works of Sextus Empiricus (2nd -3rd centuries AD, works include *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the Dogmatists*) In their own time, the skeptics had only a relatively small following. In the early modern period they had a very great influence in shaping the development of many controversies, as Popkin and others have explained.

Montaigne's work was itself instrumental in reviving philosophical skepticism as a powerful presence in modern philosophy. The Apology essay itself influenced such modern thinkers as Bacon, Descartes and Hume.

Montaigne says his motive is to answer objections to Sebond: (1) that Christian religious belief should rest on faith, not reason and (2) that Sebond's reasons for his claims were poor ones. Montaigne agrees with the first objection but replies to the second objection by arguing that Sebond's reasoning is no worse than anyone else's, since all reasoning is dubious. Montaigne's argument is an attack on human pretensions on several fronts:

- 1) Human beings' abilities are not impressive compared to those of animals.
- 2) The "ignorant savages" of North America have admirable simplicity and nobility and do not have the enormous intellectual, legal and political or religious problems of Europeans.
- 3) All the ancient schools of philosophy conflict with one another, contain contradictions and absurdities. Only the Pyrrhonian skeptics are admirable for their lack of pretension and only their philosophy is truly compatible with Christian faith by showing that human beings are weak, fallible and by showing how to rid ourselves of false and dubious opinions. This purification of the mind would leave it ready to receive whatever beliefs God may choose to inscribe on it.

- 4) If genuine knowledge is gained from experience or reason then we have none because (a) experience does not disclose the real natures of things, (e.g., heat). (b) our physical and emotional conditions influence our judgement and these are constantly changing. Since all reasoning is from some judgements to some conclusion, the certainty of all reasoning is threatened by the uncertainty of all judgements. (c) Each alleged scientific discovery is succeeded by another and what is thought true at one time is regarded as false or silly at another. How do we know that the new science of this time will not be rejected by future scientists, just as we now reject the opinions of Ptolemy and Aristotle? (Galileo 1564 - 1642. His *Dialogues* were published in 1632. Copernicus' book was published in 1543. Clearly, Montaigne was reacting, in part, to the debates about Copernicus' book, not to those about Galileo's.)

All knowledge claims seem to rest on sense experience. How do we know that we have enough senses to obtain a sufficiently accurate idea of what reality is like? Or that our senses do not give us false or distorted information? Our experiences may be quite different from those of animals. If so, how can we claim that ours is more accurate than theirs? How has our possession of reason enabled us to achieve a better life than that of the animals? Perhaps, all "normal" experience is a distortion of reality. Trying to know reality is like trying to clutch water.

Montaigne cast doubt on all philosophy, natural theology, science and morality as well as criticised superstition and prejudice. Because of the weakness of our natural capacities, we must rely on faith as our only sure access to certain truth. This is a religious and philosophical position known as fideism.

(quote p. 45 in Skepticism) Montaigne argues that we would be better off cultivating ignorance so that we will believe in the Christian message by faith alone. Not that we have no knowledge of truth. What knowledge we have has not been acquired by our own powers but has been received from our religion and the external authority and command of revelation of God's truth as contained in the Bible. It is not the type of scepticism that merely criticizes the pretensions of the human mind but pyrrhonism, suspending judgement on all propositions, even the proposition that all is doubtful. In this state of doubt, the ancient pyrrhonian sceptics taught, one will live according to nature and custom. (quote, scepticism p 47)

Montaigne's portrayal of the human situation intensified the doubts that had already been produced by the religious controversies of the Reformation and by the debates over copernicanism and by the heresies of people like Giordano

Bruno. He was deeply disturbed by the wars of religion of his time. He accepted Catholicism but opposed fanaticism in all forms and pleaded for toleration on all sides, pleading for recognition of human fallibility and limitations and casting doubt on all radical proposals for total solutions to the problems of human life.